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THE  
DANGER OF DISSENT.

BY THE REV. W. GRESLEY, M.A.

I. *That it is not uncharitable to warn Dissenters of their danger.*

CHRISTIAN charity is a term very much misunderstood or misrepresented in the present day; and yet, when plainly stated, its duties seem obvious enough. Suppose we were to see a person walking on heedlessly in the direction of a dangerous pit, apparently quite unconscious of his danger, what would be the conduct which Christian charity would require of us? Would it be right to say to ourselves, *perhaps* he may not fall into it; or, *perhaps* it may not be deep; and so let him go on?

No, surely; there cannot be a question that it would be our duty to call out as loudly as we could, to warn him of his danger.

This is, in truth, the principle of all Missionary-Societies, and Societies for the Propagation of the Gospel. We believe the heathen to be living in a state of danger; we believe that the Bible contains the revelation of God's will, and the way of salvation, and that it is God's command that it should be made known to all nations; therefore we subscribe our money for the holy purpose of maintaining those ministers whom the bishop shall ordain, as heralds of Gospel-truth, ~~to gather in the heathen to the Church~~ of Christ.

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Dissenters act from the same motive, though, as we believe, not regularly; still their motive we are bound to think is good and charitable.

Suppose, then, that when a missionary—a Dissenter it might be—went to a heathen prince—the king of Otaheite, or a New Zealand chief, or the emperor of China,—and told him that he was come to warn him of his danger, and teach him the way of salvation,—the said king, prince, or emperor was to fly out into a violent passion, and say, “What do these impertinent people mean by telling me I am in danger? Do they suppose I cannot go to heaven in my own way? Illiberal bigots! do they think *they* only know the way of salvation?”

Now, there is nothing very unlikely or unnatural in this supposition. There is some seeming reason in the heathen’s words; and yet the Dissenter who had conscientiously contributed to the sending out of the missionary would not consider that such a reception of his charity released him from the duty of endeavouring again and again to win the heathen to the faith.

Apply now the above example to the relation between Churchmen and Dissenters. I do not scruple to say that, in common with many others, I consider Dissenters to be in a state of great spiritual danger. Dissent is schism; and schism is a sin. There ought not to be any such thing as dissent. Men are not at liberty, by God’s law, to dissent from that which is the true Church. They are, therefore, in sin, and consequently in danger. My reasons for believing so will be given hereafter. All I want now to establish is, that believing this to be the fact, and having, as I think, strong reasons for my belief, the Dissenter ought not to think me uncharitable or illiberal, if I express my fears for his safety; on the contrary, he will do well to weigh seriously the reasons which I have to bring forward, the rather because what I am about to advance is not my own personal opinion only; but, as I undertake to

prove, it is what the Church universal has received for eighteen hundred years as the doctrine of Scripture.

## II. *Reason for believing Dissenters to be in a state of great danger.*

When our Lord Jesus Christ sent forth his apostles to convert and teach all nations, his commission was as follows:—"Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. (Matt. xxviii. 19.)—He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved."—(Mark xvi. 16.) There cannot be, I suppose, a difference of opinion as to the plain meaning of these words; namely, that faith *and* baptism are necessary to salvation. This position may be strengthened by very many passages from the Acts of the Apostles, as in the case of St. Paul, the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Philippian jailor, in which it invariably appears that as soon as a new convert professed his faith in Christ, he was straightway baptized; *nor was he a member of the Christian Church, until that holy sacrament had been received.*

Now, I entreat my dissenting readers, and I do so most solemnly and earnestly, to bear with my bigotry and illiberality, when I express my serious apprehensions that they *have never received Christian baptism.* What, some will say, do you unchristianize us? Was there ever such bigotry? All I answer is, abuse, but hear me. The question is not, whether the statement is liberal or illiberal, but whether it is true or false.

Let me beg of you to take the word of God for your guide, and consider whether you can *prove* to your own satisfaction that you have ever certainly been baptised. What is baptism? and who can perform that holy ceremony? If any person, no matter who, throw water on me, and utter certain words, would that be Christian baptism? Would God's grace go with it? Can a child

or a woman baptize? If not, who then can baptize? Our Lord said to his apostles, "Go ye, and baptize all nations." The apostles, before their departure from the world, commissioned others to perform this and other ministerial functions. Again, the Bishops whom they ordained commissioned others in their turn.—There never was any doubt that persons so ordained by the bishops have authority and power to baptize; but whether any others have the same power, there is very great doubt. The authorized practice of the Church universal has been for ordained ministers to baptize, and any other baptism has been held as not valid; that is, as being no baptism at all. It is true there have been differences of opinion on the subject. Some have supposed that baptism by the hands of one who had received the ministerial commission, and afterwards became a heretic, or separated from the Church, would still be valid. Others have thought that, *in a case of emergency*, if a child is sprinkled with water in the name of the blessed Trinity, even by an unordained person, it is valid. But neither of these cases applies to *unordained* persons baptizing *without emergency*; and there are some Dissenters who do not even baptize in the name of the blessed Trinity. The whole question is full of difficulty. The twelfth article of the Convocation of 1575 declares that baptism "is only to be ministered by a lawful minister or deacon;" and in the service the Church directs that in cases of doubtfulness, her ministers shall use this form of words:—"If thou art not already baptized, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost."

Now, I beg Dissenters to observe the point of my argument. I do not mean positively to assert (God forbid!) that they have not been baptized. God is their judge; but I do assert that there is great reason to *doubt* whether they have been baptized or no. But this is a most awful question. "As many as have been baptized into Christ," says St. Paul, "have put

on Christ." (Gal. iii. 27.) If they have not been baptized into Christ, they have not put on Christ. "By one Spirit," he says in another place, "ye are baptized into one body." (1 Cor. xii. 13.) If they, then, have not been baptized, they are not members of that spiritual body. But why, in such an important business, remain in doubt? Why not make certain? If a man were informed by some kind friend of a flaw in his title-deeds, would he not instantly take measures to remove it? If the deed by which he possessed his property had not been duly signed and sealed, or witnessed by the proper persons, would he let a day pass before he took steps to remove the flaw? Let not the Dissenter accuse me of desiring to deprive him of any privilege which he possesses. On the contrary, my earnest hope is to induce him to take measures to possess himself of what there is reason to fear he has not. I wish to prevail on him to remove the flaw and doubtfulness of his title to heaven, by going with humble faith and penitence for his "sins, negligences, and ignorances," to one of those of whom there can be no doubt that they have received a commission to perform this necessary sacrament. This is too serious a matter to be lightly regarded.

### III. *Second reason for believing Dissenters to be in danger.*

The second reason which I shall state is similar to the former.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples, in a most solemn and emphatic manner, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." This was a

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\* John vi. 53. This passage has always been considered by the Church to refer to the sacrament of the Lord's supper. But even suppose otherwise, still the obligation on all persons who have opportunity to partake of the holy communion, is proved from the terms of its institution, and has never been doubted amongst Christians.

hard saying, and it does not appear that, at the first, the disciples understood it. Subsequent events, however, explained its meaning. On the night before his crucifixion, "Jesus took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, *This is my body*. Likewise, after supper he took the cup, and gave it to them, saying, *This is my blood* of the new Testament, which was shed for you, and for many, for the remission of sins. *Drink ye ALL of it*." Again, in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul said, "*The cup which we bless*, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (See Matt. xxvi. 26; Mark xiv. 22; Luke xxii. 17; 1 Cor. xi. 23.)

In accordance with these and various other passages of Scripture, the Church of all ages has held of this as of the sacrament of baptism, that it is "generally necessary to salvation;" that is to say, that unless any obstacle prevent, we cannot be saved without it. As by baptism we are grafted into the body of Christ, so by the sacrament of the Lord's supper, rightly administered and faithfully received, we continue therein: "we dwell in Christ, and he in us; we are one with Christ, and he with us."

Now if there was a doubt as to the possibility of baptism being duly administered by one who has not received God's commission to do so, the doubt is very much greater with regard to the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ. The cup *which we bless*, said St. Paul, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The cup which *who* bless? The cup which any man, woman, or child blesses, is *that* the communion of the blood of Christ—the means of conveying to us his most sacred blood? No, surely; the cup which was blessed by the *apostles*, and those who, through them, received the Divine commission to do so. In every age of the Church these have been well known as the persons who are authorised to consecrate the bread



and wine. Persons presuming to do so without the Divine commission have been looked on as exceeding sinners, and their act as null and void.

The most serious and alarming consideration is involved in this doctrine; namely, *whether Dissenters have ever eaten the body, or drunk the blood of Christ*, without which, we are expressly told, "there is no life in us." Whether the sacrament which they have partaken of be not a *mock sacrament*, that is to say, *no sacrament at all*. But this is not the whole. If any man wilfully has thus profaned the holy sacrament, it is much to be feared that he has eaten and drunk his own condemnation, not considering the Lord's body. Even in the case of those who have ignorantly partaken of such mock-sacrament (of which class I verily believe most Dissenters to be,) still, with whatsoever good intention they have partaken, it cannot be supposed, at least it cannot be proved, that an *unreal* sacrament can have conveyed to them any benefit, or in any way have strengthened or refreshed their souls. If the food which we receive into our natural bodies possess not in itself any real wholesomeness or power of nourishment, it matters not with what appetite we eat it.

And here again, let it not be said that we seek to deprive the Dissenters of any benefit or privilege: on the contrary, we would earnestly entreat them to come and partake of all the privileges which we have to offer, "without money and without price."

#### IV. *Third reason for believing Dissenters to be in great danger.*

The third reason which I shall mention is, *their separation from the one Catholic and Apostolic Church.*

This topic requires some previous explanation.—The Dissenter believes in an invisible Church, consisting of all those who truly believe in Christ. And

so do we, in common with the Church of all ages, believe in an invisible Church—a union of all saints and martyrs, and holy men of old who have lived and died, and those who now live in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship. This we call the "communion of saints." But we also believe "one Catholic and Apostolic Church;" a *visible* body mercifully founded by Christ, in order to constitute the point of union of Christians in all ages, as well as for various other providential uses. In denying this doctrine of a Catholic Church, *as well as* a communion of saints, the Dissenter maintains an opinion in direct opposition to the Apostles' Creed, which has been received in the Church from the beginning. The doctrine in question may be proved also from several texts of Scripture.—Our Saviour says, if a man "neglect to hear the Church, let him be to thee as an heathen man and a publican." (Matt. xviii. 17.) But if the Church be invisible only, how can we know it when it speaks? Again, St. Paul calls the Church "the pillar and ground of the truth." (1 Tim. iii. 15.) How can an *invisible* Church be to us the pillar and ground of the truth? The Dissenters say, each man's Church or communion is to him the pillar and ground of the truth. The Baptist's society is the pillar and ground to him, the Socinian's to him, and the Church of England to its own members. What follows? Why, first, that on this principle each man's own opinion is to him the pillar and ground of the truth; next, that we have a multitude of pillars setting forth, or upholding, contradictory truths! One pillar bearing inscribed on it, that Jesus is a mere man; another, that he is "very God of very God." Now, that these pillars, setting forth, or upholding as the truth, doctrines directly contradictory to each other, should be all true Churches, is impossible. Therefore, it is manifest that there must be one, and only one true Church, which by the superintending Providence of God, shall maintain forever the essential truths of revelation.



Such a Church is that founded by the Apostles, which, through the revolution of kingdoms, and the cloud of thick darkness, that during many ages rested on the earth, has still maintained the vital and essential truths of the blessed Gospel. It was this visible Church which first preached the Gospel, and gathered in the nations to the fold of Christ. The same Church it was that collected the holy Scriptures as we now have them, and has been "the witness and keeper" of God's word down to the present time. It is the same Church which, when those Scriptures were misinterpreted by subtle men, promulgated her creeds for the edification of her children. In times of darkness and barbarism, when learning and science were well nigh lost upon the earth, and the Church herself was overlaid with superstition, still, in a wonderful manner, she was the instrument of God to preserve the sacred Scripture, and the great doctrines gathered out of Scripture in her creeds, together with the apostolic succession of the ministry commissioned to administer to the people the holy sacraments. And as she has preserved the truth in *dark* ages, no less important is her use for the same purpose in an age of *light*. Amidst the conflicting opinions and jarring theories of the present schismatical and unbelieving age, still the Church preserves the faith of Christ; and still in her creeds she upholds, as on a pillar, the fundamental truths of the Gospel, so that he who runs may read; and still she is the dispenser of divine grace through her sacraments and ordinances, even as God appointed her at the beginning.

If any one finds it difficult to follow this argument, from want of the habit of considering the Church as one great whole, let me draw his attention to the circumstances of our own branch of the Church universal, the history of which, it may be presumed, he has considered. There was a time—in the reigns of Elizabeth and James—when the English Church, purged of Romish corruption, and restored to her ancient purity,

was one and entire, and maintained, in all essential points, the apostolic doctrine and fellowship. Then rose up certain men who "caused divisions," contrary to the received doctrine, and began to "walk disorderly." First, the bishop of Rome, contrary to all ecclesiastical order, sent emissaries into the dioceses of the English bishops; and in several places established schismatical communion, endeavouring to bring back the corruptions and superstitions which the English Church had, with almost universal consent, removed, as inconsistent with Scripture and the practice of the ancient Church. Then, other sectarians, under the name of Brownists or Independents, Socinians, Baptists, and a host of others, began to cause divisions and offences; some objecting to surplices, and some to bishops; and in the end most wickedly overturned for a while, though it was not permitted to them to extinguish, the English Church. These men were clearly guilty of great sin—first, in their separation from a true Church; then in the violence to which their separation led. And if separation was thus sinful and dangerous in the reign of Elizabeth, and James, and Charles, it is impossible that it should not be so now. If the separatists of those days cut themselves off, as they most certainly did, from the privileges and communion of the Church, it does not seem possible that their descendants should regain those privileges, except by again joining themselves to the Church from which their fathers sinfully separated.

We solemnly warn Dissenters, therefore, of their danger, and exhort them at once to place themselves out of it. We do not ask them to give up the doctrine of an invisible Church; nay, we exhort them to maintain it as a high and holy mystery; but we ask them to add to that the doctrine of a visible Catholic Church. *We ask them to believe, what one would think is not very unreasonable, that it is the will of God, that those who are joined together in one common faith ought also*

*to be joined in outward union*—ought to worship God together, and partake together of the holy communion. To set up altar against altar, and pulpit against pulpit in the same place, is palpably inconsistent with Christian charity and union, and must inevitably bring God's displeasure on those who do such things.

V. *The foregoing reasons viewed together.*

I beg the attention of Dissenters to the topic which I am now about to bring forward: it is a very important one, but one which I fear they have but little considered, if they ever heard of it.

Some Dissenters, Wesleyans for instance, say that they differ *very slightly* from the Church; and therefore, even supposing that they are wrong, they cannot imagine that there can be any danger in their differences.

First, let us consider the question, whether, as far as we know of God's laws, he does not sometimes inflict tremendous punishment for what may seem to us an error of judgment? Eve would not believe the warning of God; she ate the forbidden fruit, and died. Uzza touched the ark, which all but the priests were forbidden to touch; he did so with the good intention, as it would seem, of saving it from falling; but he was struck dead for his error. So it is under the Christian covenant. "He that believeth, and is baptized, shall be saved.—He that believeth not shall be damned." These instances I mention to shew, that by the law of God severe punishment is wont to fall on men for what some may consider mere errors of judgment.

But that is not the main point to which I wish to direct the mind of the Dissenter, and principally the Wesleyan.

*Is he sure that his error is slight?* He differs from the Church in some minor points, as he believes, and separates himself from her communion. But this very separation, even in the slightest degree, may bring in its train the most awful consequences. Those who

entered the ark were safe. All who remained without, *it mattered not whether at a smaller or greater distance*, were drowned. I do entreat the Dissenter to consider the possible, nay probable, consequences of separation. *It may have cut him off from the Christian sacraments.* There is a great doubt whether he has ever been spiritually joined to Christ in baptism. Still greater, whether he has ever spiritually eaten and drunk the body and blood of Christ. If not, he *has no spiritual life in him*; he may have been all along eating and drinking his own damnation. Hence, by natural consequence, he has no sympathy with Christ's body, the Church; yea, rather an hostility against it. Will not this account for the fact, otherwise not easily explained, of the violent and unbridled wickedness to which Dissenters in times past have been led, when, beginning with apparently small disputes, about the use of surplices, and the cross in baptism, they caused a Schism in the Church? Would it not seem that *thenceforth the Holy Spirit ceased to guide them?* And so they went on until they murdered their king; drove God's servants, the bishops, from the land; and trampled under foot his most holy Church. It is impossible to conceive wickedness more awful than this.

And are not Dissenters even now in danger of falling into the same excess of sin? Does not the most bitter malice against the Church corrode the hearts of some? not of all—God forbid that I should say so, or think so—yet all are liable to the same sinfulness, if deserted by God's Spirit. But in many Satan even now reigns triumphant; causing them to vilify God's holy Church; crying, "Down with it, down with it, even to the ground!" Let them thank God, who has hitherto restrained their violence.

I would entreat them to consider the question which I have just suggested, whether the bitterness and violence, which so many exhibit, may not arise from desertion of the Holy Spirit, *in consequence of the ne-*

*glect or invalid reception of those sacraments which he has ordained to be dispensed, as the continual means of grace, through the instrumentality of his visible Church.*

And let those who are not conscious of any such hostility to the Church, yet live in separation from it, consider the dilemma in which they are placed. They differ from the Church for great or for small things.— If for great things, for essential and fundamental points, then they are liable to the charge of heresy. If for small and non-essential things, why cause a Schism? and why needlessly deprive themselves of the benefit of those sacraments and ordinances which the Church has been commissioned to administer?

It is no safe refuge for the Dissenter, that, in his separation from the Church, or in his hostility to it, he is acting, as it is erroneously termed, *conscientiously*. St. Paul conscientiously, as he thought, persecuted the Church; and some thought they did God service when they put the apostles to death. Let the Dissenter learn from hence *into what depths of sin it is possible for a mistakenly conscientious man to fall*; and let him not be satisfied with the approbation of his conscience, unless he has taken those various means which God has afforded to make sure *that his conscience is rightly informed*.

#### VI. *Objections answered.*

The usual plea of Dissenters for their separation from the Church is, that there are various imperfections in it. To this I answer, that it is not competent for a man to say, I object to this thing and that, and *therefore I will leave the Church*. He ought to try to have them amended. Those who leave the Church incur the loss of those benefits which the Church is ordained to afford. No one says that the Church on earth is perfect; though established by God, it is administered by men, and therefore liable to error. If such errors go to great lengths—if the Church insists on our doing

any thing plainly contrary to God's law, as to worship images and pray to saints, then, as Hooker says, "We dare not communicate with her concerning her sundry gross and grievous abominations." "We must obey God rather than men." We must believe that God will raise up for us some way of deliverance. But I never heard of any such objections or abuses laid to the charge of the reformed branch of God's Church in England. She is purified from her former corruptions; restored, as nearly as may be, to the apostolic model; she is sound, at least, in fundamentals—even Dissenters acknowledge this. Therefore, whatever may be the blemishes which are supposed to exist, or really do exist in her, yet, since she alone can shew that she has God's commission, *it is sinful and dangerous to separate from her communion.*

#### VII. *Who is the Dissenter's best friend?*

Such, then, being the relative position between the reformed Church and Dissent, I would ask the Dissenter, *which is your real friend, the liberal, or the (so-called) bigot?* the man who plainly tells you the danger of your position, or he who conceals from you your peril, talks of your piety and conscientiousness, and so leads you to suppose that you are neither in a state of sinfulness nor danger? Surely he who declares the truth, however unpalatable, is a better friend than he who prophesies smooth things to your destruction.

I am bound, in fairness to make one important admission to Dissenters, and to confess my belief that the unfortunate and dangerous position in which they stand is, in many cases, attributable, in the first place, to the inactivity which pervaded the Church, as well as the whole nation, during a great part of the last century; and, in the second place, to the principles which, though entirely contrary to the Church's real doctrine, have been inculcated by many of the members of the Church. There are, I am persuaded, many hundreds



and thousands of well-intentioned men living in separation from the Church, in sheer ignorance of their danger, *and this principally because God's ministers have never taught them the real truth.* The true doctrine of the unity of the Church, and the sinfulness of schism, has not been preached as it ought to have been from our pulpits. Many ministers have rather encouraged Dissenters in their delusion, by telling them that their faith is orthodox, and their differences trivial; neglecting at the same time to teach them that there was a doubtfulness as to the validity of their sacraments, and that separation from the apostolic Church was against the laws of God. Others have contributed to the same delusion, by resting the necessity of conformity on lower principles, such as expediency, and obedience to the law of the land. And so, many persons have thought lightly of separation from what they deemed a mere national establishment, who would have remained faithful, had they been taught that the Church was Christ's own divine institution.

Let us hope that these things are now beginning to be better known and valued; that the necessity of the Christian sacraments,—the essential unity of the Church,—the duty of joining ourselves, through God's appointed means, to that which is the body of Christ,—the true nature of the Church, not as a mere human establishment, which may be put down by the same power that raised it up, but as a divine ordinance of Christ, which must continue so long as the world endureth,—let us trust that these vital doctrines will henceforth be acknowledged amongst Christians. And when the voice of long-neglected truth has once more gone forth through the land, let us entertain a firm hope that better days are in store for the Church.—Superstition and heresy have in times past more fearfully prevailed against the Church, than now she is vexed by schism. But as the former have, through the providence of God, been dispersed, so we doubt not

will the various sects, which now mar her beauty, again return to their holy mother, when she raises her voice in accents of warning and kindness.

Then will she send forth her missionaries and distribute the word of God with some prospect of success, when all shall speak the same thing, and "utter a certain sound." And we may at length hope that the bright anticipations of the elder prophets may have a literal fulfilment; and that the knowledge of the truth may spread over the earth, as the waters cover the sea.

#### VIII. *Concluding remarks.*

I trust that these arguments will be received by the Dissenter who reads them, in the same spirit in which they have been written—in the spirit of truth and charity. It is no question of private opinion between him and me. If it were so, his opinion might be as good as mine. But it is not a personal dispute between one individual and another; it is simply a question *whether he or the apostolic Church is right.*

And, after all, I would say to the Dissenter, "What unreasonable thing is it that we propose to you?" We ask you to go with us to God's house, to take sweet counsel together, to join in our prayers and praises, to partake of our holy sacraments, to join in our communion. Our churches, our hearts are open to you. We entreat you to live with us as brethren in holy fellowship. Is this unreasonable or uncharitable on our part? Surely, if you refuse our fellowship, despise our ministers, and disdain our holy service, the want of charity rests with you.

O that we could in any way overcome this lamentable spirit of disunion, whether by calm remonstrance, or solemn argument, or acts of love! What would we not willingly do, consistent with God's law, to win you back to our fellowship, so that we might be again united as one fold under one Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord?

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